

German stem cell clinic shut down amidst safety concerns

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On Sunday the UK Telegraph reported the closing of a stem cell clinic in Germany that has been the source of international concern. Last year, a clinic offering stem cell cures in Costa Rica was shut down by the country's health ministry.

In both cases, the concern came from claims that injected stem cells would cure a wide range of diseases, even though there is no proof that the cells will be effective. One child who received stem cell injections at the German clinic died last August, and a second child also had complications. His family is suing the clinic.

According to the Telegraph:

“ A Sunday Telegraph undercover reporter who suffers from multiple sclerosis and is confined to a wheelchair was told last week during a consultation at the XCell-Center that he could walk again.

According to XCell, about 25 British patients a month â including children with severe disabilities â are treated at its clinic in Düsseldorf and at another in nearby Cologne.

The treatment involves taking bone marrow from patients, harvesting stem cells from the bone marrow and then reinjecting those stem cells into other parts of the body, including the brain, the spine and the neck.

The U.S. and other countries regulate clinical trials and demand proof that the proposed treatment is going to be safe and effective before researchers are allowed to try the technique in human patients. That process is slow, but it's also what stands between people and possibly deadly and ineffective therapies. Countries without stringent regulatory controls are now playing host to clinics much like the one in Germany who offer the promise of cures without proof.

The international community has become so concerned about the risk of these clinics that the International Society for Stem Cell Research launched a website offering to investigate claims of stem cell clinics before people spend money to travel overseas (see A Closer Look at Stem Cell Treatments). CIRM also offers information about stem cell tourism on our website.

Last year, CIRM co-sponsored a public seminar in partnership with the ISSCR on the responsible path for delivering stem cell therapies to the clinic. The video of that stem cell tourism seminar is on our website.

Krista Conger at Stanford University School of Medicine recently wrote an excellent piece about stem cell tourism for their magazine, which begins:

“ On the surface it seems easy. Overseas stem cell "clinics" peddling unproven treatments to desperate and dying patients, charging tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege of being injected with mysterious concoctions of cells meant to cure almost every ailment: What's not to hate?

She goes on to quote CIRM grantee Jeanne Loring of Scripps Research Institute who says desperate patients don't see it that way:

“ "When we report something good about stem cells, it gets picked up in the media, or in a blog that patients read," says Jeanne Loring, PhD, director of the Center for Regenerative Medicine at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, Calif. "It gives them more ammunition to say that the FDA is stupid for denying access to treatments that seem like they should work."

Loring has been actively involved in educating people about the dangers of stem cell tourism, and participated in this video with CIRM:

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Tags: stem cell tourism, Loring, Scripps

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